IMPACT'S MODEL OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON ATHLETES OF A MEDIUM SCALE SPORTS

MODELO DE IMPACTO DE REDES SOCIALES EN ATLETAS DE UN EVENTO DEPORTIVO MEDIANO

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ABSTRACT

The use of social network sites (SNS) as a marketing tool is constantly rising in both the sports and the tourism sector. To fully take advantage of the benefits offered by this media, it is important to know the impact generated by SNS. The aim of this study was to analyse the impact of SNS within the participants of a medium-sized sporting event. The sample consisted of 254 athletes of the Benidorm Half race. The results of the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) showed satisfactory fit indices, discriminant validity and reliability. The results identified three factors measuring the impact of SNS among participants. A significant influence of perceived value on SNS and seeking additional information on eWOM was found. The additional information factor also had a significant influence on the perceived value on SNS.

KEY WORDS: sports event, sports tourism, social media, factorial analysis, social networks, perceived value, eWOM

RESUMEN

El uso de las redes sociales (RRSS) como herramienta de marketing está en constante auge tanto en el sector deportivo como en el turístico. Para poder aprovecharse de los beneficios que pueden brindar estos medios es importante conocer el impacto generado por las RRSS. El objetivo de este estudio fue el análisis del impacto de las RRSS en los participantes en un evento deportivo mediano. La muestra fue compuesta de 254 atletas de la carrera Benidorm Half.

Los resultados del análisis factorial exploratorio (AFE) y del análisis factorial confirmatorio (AFC) mostraron índices de ajuste, una validez discriminante y una fiabilidad satisfactorios. Los resultados permitieron identificar tres factores que miden el impacto de las RRSS entre los participantes. Se comprobó una influencia significativa del valor percibido en RRSS y la búsqueda de información adicional en el *eWOM*. El factor de información adicional también influyó significativamente en el valor percibido en RRSS.

PALABRAS CLAVE: evento deportivo, turismo deportivo, medios sociales, análisis factorial, redes sociales, valor percibido, *eWOM*

INTRODUCTION

Sports have a considerable scope of relevance and the hosting of both, large and small scale sports events can contribute to the enhancement of the image of the host locality, as well as contributing to local development. Accordingly, Sanz (1, p.81) defines the concept of a sports event as "a sports activity which has a high level of social impact in the form of a strong media presence, and which generates economic revenue on its own"

Small and medium scale sports events have a great potential for the promotion of sports tourism in a destination, as well as for encouraging physical activity among the population (2). They have an influence on the image of the destination and the host city and offer economic, social, and environmental benefits. Considering the economic benefits, Veltri et al. (3) point out that these benefits may be proportionally higher for smaller events than for macro-events.

The communication and promotion of sport has always played a fundamental role. Sports organisations have continuously tried to adapt to new technologies and to modernize, starting with the arrival of colour television, the emergence of the internet, optical fibre, mobile telecommunication and, more recently, the web 2.0 and, associated with it, social network sites (SNS) (4,5).

Social media is an affordable tool for small and medium-sized organisations to interact with potential participants in sports events. The use of social media in sports management offers benefits in marketing and communication (6). The persuasion theory states that thoughts provoked by persuasive communication are an important mediator of attitude change. Therefore, it is crucial to deliver messages carefully. Such messages can persuade consumers by influencing both beliefs and attitudes, and subsequently the behaviour (7).

There is increasing evidence that the use of social media in sports is of great importance (8,9). However, it has become apparent that sports organisations are still not fully exploiting the social media marketing and the two-way communication opportunities offered by social media (10).

Considering tourism, Rojano et al. (11) point out that the role of social media is key in the tourism decision-making and that its use will continue to grow.

Furthermore, proper planning of social media strategies is of enormous importance for competitiveness in the tourism sector (12).

Yoon and Uysal (13) show that, for people interested in travel, word-of-mouth (WOM) is one of the most trusted and frequently sought-after sources. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has a strong influence on decisions and is defined by Litvin et al. (14, p.9) as "all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers".

In their study about the use and impact of social media, Fotis et al. (15) indicate that user-created content is perceived to be more trustworthy compared to official tourism sources. This type of communication has relevant impacts on the tourist's decision to purchase as well as on aspects related to the decision, the perception of trust and brand awareness and loyalty (14). Moreover, from a tourism industry business perspective, eWOM can provide a competitive advantage by offering the possibility of direct interaction with consumers, fast response times, and targeted marketing strategies (16).

Tourist loyalty to the destination has a causal relationship with motivation and satisfaction (13). The consumer's perceived value is another important factor in the evaluation of a product or service. This value is defined as "the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given" (17, p.14).

Jin et al. (18) argue in their study on the World Athletics Championships that the perceived value has a direct influence on the behavioural intentions and the destination image influences the perception of value. Likewise, other authors consider that there is a relationship between perceived value, destination image, and behavioural intentions in the context of international sports events, as well as in tourism (19,20).

Research in the field of social media in sports tourism and in sport itself is mostly focused on large events (21-24). Although more and more research is also focusing on small and medium scale sports events, as well as on the magnitudes of social media in general, there is still very little research that relates social media impacts to small sports events. However, as recent studies show, academic interest in this area is growing steadily (25,26).

Manzano (27) emphasises the importance of understanding the various factors that influence a tourist's perceived value. Thus, the aim of this study is to analyse the interrelationship of the factors derived from social media that impact the athletes participating in a sports event such as the Benidorm Half.

Therefore, we propose the following three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): The additional information sought on social networking sites has a positive and significant influence on the eWOM.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The additional information sought on social networking sites has a positive and significant influence on the perceived value on social networking sites.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): The perceived value on social networking sites has a positive and significant influence on the eWOM.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The sample was composed of 254 athletes who ran the Benidorm Half Marathon. A non-probabilistic convenience sampling procedure was followed in accordance with other research carried out in the area of sports events (28-30). However, in order to avoid the selection bias, we tried to achieve a sample with the same proportion of gender and nationalities as in the population, i.e., in the total of participants in the race (65% men and 35% women, approximately 65% of Spanish nationality, and the rest international, with the vast majority being British (23%)).

The sample group was composed of 64.6% men and 35.4% women, with a mean age of 45.64 years (SD = 11.259) and an age range of 18 to 71 years. The total population of the 37th edition of the Benidorm Half was 3200 runners. The sample size reflected 7.94% of the population.

A university degree was held by nearly half of the participants (46.06%), followed by a high school diploma (24.80%). 68.11% were employed, followed by self-employed (13.39%). Only 2.76% were unemployed. Most athletes were married (55.12%) or single (35.43%).

Just over one third of participants learned about the event through friends or family, and around one third through the internet. It is noteworthy that 12.2% learned about the event via Facebook and 6.3% via Instagram.

In terms of the sports tourism profile, 71.30% of the non-residents of Benidorm stayed overnight in the locality, with hotels (67.9%) and flats (19%) being the most frequented types of accommodation. 30.70% of the athletes were accompanied by at least one person, and 22.40% came with more than 5 people. More than half of the athletes stated that they do physical activities for more than 5 hours a week and 40.20% between 3 and 5 hours.

Regarding the use of SNS, the most used among the participants were WhatsApp (88.40%), Facebook (77.50%), Instagram (64.70%), and Youtube (54.20%). In total, the participants used 12 different SNS.

Table 1. Socio-demographic data and sports tourism profile

Age		45,64 (SD = 11,259)
Gender	Male	64,60%
	Female	35,40%
Nationality	Spanish	67,3%
	British	24%
	Belgian	3,1%
	Argentinian	0,4%
	Irish	2,0%
	French	0,80%
	Dutch	0,80%
	US citizenship	0,80%
	Polish	0,40%
	Norwegian	0,40%
Educational level	Without studies	0,79%
	Primary	5,51%
	Seconday	12,99%
	A levels	24,80%
	University degree	46,06%
	PhD	9,84%
Occupation	Student	3,94%
	Employee	68,11%
	Self employed / Freelance	13,39%
	Retired / Pensioner	11,02%
	Unemployed	2,76%
	Homemaker	0,79%
Marital status	Single	35,43%
	Married	55,12%
	Divorced	7,87%
	Widowed	1,57%
Overnight stays by non-residents in the locality	Yes	71,30%
	No	28,70%
Type of accommodation	Hotel	67,9%
	Apartment	19,0%
	House of family or friends	5,4%
	Second home	7,1%
	Camping or RV	0,60%
Knowledge about the event	Internet	27,2%
	Facebook	12,2%
	Instagram	6,3%
	Family or friends	36,6%
	Publicity	8,7%
	Word of mouth (WOM)	9,1%
No. of accompanying persons	0	8,30%
	1	30,70%
	2	13,00%
	3	12,20%
	4	7,50%
	5	5,90%
	More than 5	22,40%
Frequency of physical activity	Between 1 and 3 hours a week	8,70%
	Between 3 and 5 hours a week	40,20%
	More than 5 hours a week	51,20%
Type of used SNS	Facebook	77,50%
	Instagram	64,70%
	Twitter	29,30%
	LinkedIn	22,90%
	Whatsapp	88,40%
	TikTok	6,00%
	Pinterest	8,00%
	Other SNS	2,40%
	YouTube	54,20%

Source: Own elaboration

PROCEDURE

We used a survey as the data collection technique, and the used instrument for this purpose was an *ad hoc* self-report questionnaire. The design of the questionnaire was based on three blocks. The first block was composed of a series of socio-demographic questions, the second one consisted of questions on the sports-touristic profile, and the last one was composed of a series of items. In this last section, questions related to the use of social media were analysed. A 7-point Likert-type scale was used in this block (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). The items proposed in this last block were adapted and modified from previous studies, which investigated the perceived value (31), future intentions (32), social media influences (33, 34), social media in sports marketing (35) and social media in tourism (36).

The data collection was carried out both on-site and online. The on-site collection took place on the 27th of November 2021 during the Benidorm Half race. A researcher and an assistant, to whom the researchers gave prior instructions, handed out flyers with a QR code. This QR code led to the questionnaire, a Google form, which was available in Spanish and English. The interviewers did not interfere in answering the questions, but they did help translate for the athletes who did not know either Spanish or English.

For the merely online version, the event organisers sent an email, containing a link to the Google form, to the database of all registered participants for the event. Both the athletes who received the flyer during the event and those who answered via the email link had time to answer the questionnaire until December 23rd, 2021, which was the closing date of the questionnaire. Therefore, it made no difference whether the questionnaire was delivered on-site or online.

To give more validity to the obtained data, a control question and age verification were used as an exclusion criterion for the questionnaire. As a control question, respondents were asked to mark a 1 in this question. The questionnaires of all participants who indicated that they were under the age of 18 years were removed.

STATISTICAL DATA ANALYSIS

All analyses were conducted using the statistical packages IBM SPSS version 27.0.1 and JASP 0.14.1.0. First, the data were cleaned by removing participants who did not pass the control question or who were underage. To ensure data quality, 10% of the questionnaires were chosen at random and checked to ensure that all data was correct. This was done by checking whether there were any questionnaires filled in with contradictions, i.e., if any respondents had answered that they do not use SNS and subsequently answered that SNS create a good impression of the Benidorm Half.

After this, the socio-demographic variables and those of the sports-touristic profile were analysed by means of descriptive statistics, using indicators such as

the mean and standard deviation for the numerical variables, and frequency tables and percentages for the nominal variables.

After the descriptive analysis and following the recommendations of Anderson and Gerbing (37), a two-step analysis was used for the Likert scale questions of the questionnaire.

In order to extract the factors into which the items of the last block of the questionnaire could be grouped, we first performed an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) based on the recommendations of Lloret-Segura et al. (38). The Varimax was used as the rotation method.

The first step was the calculation of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (KMO), as well as Bartlett's test of sphericity. Afterwards, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was applied to verify the factor structure derived from the EFA.

To measure the adequacy of the proposed model, fit indices were calculated using the following indices in addition to the chi-square: gamma index (GFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), Bollen's Incremental Fit (IFI), Comparative Fit (CFI), Bentler-Bonett Normed Fit (NFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and standardised root mean square residual (SRMR).

To analyse reliability, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) were used. Discriminant validity was tested through R2 estimates. The proposed structural model was then evaluated using the standardised beta coefficients (β) and the significance level (t-value).

RESULTS

The exploratory factor analysis allowed the reduction of the scale into three factors, each with an eigenvalue greater than 1. These three factors explained 61.36% of the variance. According to Kaiser's considerations (39), the KMO index showed a value of 0.820 and was therefore adequate for factor analysis. There was significance in Bartlett's test of sphericity, with a value of p<0.001.

The cut-off point for determining the number of factors was set at components with an eigenvalue greater than 1. One item was eliminated, as it presented very similar factor loadings and both were relatively low, below 0.54 in two constructs.

Subsequently, the CFA was applied to the scale derived from the factorial solution of the EFA. All factor loadings were found to be significant (p<0.001). However, one item was eliminated as it had a very low factor loading (<0.40).

After this adjustment, a new EFA was performed which extracted three factors explaining 66.819% of the variance. These three factors were called "perceived value on SNS" (4 items), "interaction and eWOM" (4 items), and "additional information" (2 items). The first factor is associated with the image obtained on SNS and the actual image of the event, i.e., the fulfilment of

expectations. Therefore, the intention to attend again was also associated with this factor, as it is closely related to the perceived value in general.

The communalities of all items showed adequate values above 0.40 (40). The results of this second EFA are reflected in table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive factors and EFA results (eigenvalues, explained variance, Cronbach's α, rotated factor structure and communalities)

	Mean	SD	Factor loading	Communalities
Factor 1. - *Perceived value on SNS.* (Eigenvalue: 3.987; Explained variance (%): 26,824; Cronbach's α: 0.82)				
Item 1. The social networks created a good impression of the Benidorm Half?	5.96	1.309	.773	.661
Item 2. If you use social networks, would you say the expectations of the event created by the social networks have been fulfilled?	5.37	1.707	.802	.722
Item 3. If you use social networks, would you say that the expectations of the destination created by the social networks have been fulfilled?	5.70	1.372	.821	.748
Item 5. If you have the oportunity, will you assist again at the Benidor Half event?	6.14	1.501	.704	.509
Factor 2. - *Interaction and eWOM.* (Eigenvalue: 1.457; Explained variance (%): 23,273; Cronbach's α: 0.803)				
Item 6. Did you search and establish "friend requests" with other athletes or do you "follow" other participants on social networks?	2.74	2.19	.771	.607
Item 7. The social networks helped you to interact with other participants?	3.69	2.187	.796	.677
Item 8. Did you post in social networks about your attendance in the race?	5.22	2.359	.584	.453
Item 9. Did you use social networks to promote your paricipation and/or to motivate others to attend?	4.05	2.412	.778	.678
Factor 3. - *Additional information.* (Eigenvalue: 1.238; Explained variance (%): 16,722; Cronbach's α: 0.802)				
Item 10. Did you use social networks to get information about the destination of Benidorm?	4.22	2.283	.860	0,809
Item 11. Did you look for information in social networks about restaurants, accommodation or other activities available in the location of the event?	4.15	2.343	.891	.818

Different adjustment indices were used to test the adequacy of the proposed model. The goodness-of-fit indices showed a good fit of the model. The chi-square was significant ($\chi2$=70.049, gl=32, p<0.001) and the standardised chi-square ($\chi2$/gl) with a value of 2.189 was in the optimal range between 2.0 and 3.0, as proposed by Bollen (41).

The RMSEA and SRMR indices showed values below 0.08 (0.073 and 0.048, respectively). Likewise, the rest of the indices showed a good model fit, as all indices showed values above 0.90: GFI = 0.939; TLI = 0.933; IFI = 0.953; CFI = 0.953; and NFI = 0.917.

Cronbach's alpha, CR, and AVE were used for the reliability analysis. Cronbach's alpha for the global scale was 0.809, reflecting an adequate internal consistency. As recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein (42), Cronbach's alpha was above 0.71 for all factors, thus indicating the reliability of the measures.

Likewise, the CR showed values above 0.80, exceeding the minimum value of 0.70 recommended by Hair et al. (43). Similarly, the AVE, with a range of 0.544 to 0.767, was higher than the value of 0.50 set by Bagozzi and Yi (44) (see table 3).

Table 3. Results of CFA, CR and AVE

|	F1	F2	F3
Factor 1. - Perceived value on SNS.			
Item 1. The social networks created a good impression of the Benidorm Half?	0.714		
Item 2. If you use social networks, would you say the expectations of the event created by the social networks have been fulfilled?	0.830		
Item 3. If you use social networks, would you say that the expectations of the destination created by the social networks have been fulfilled?	0.860		
Item 5. If you have the oportunity, will you assist again at the Benidor Half event?	0.555		
Factor 2. - Interaction and eWOM.			
Item 6. Did you search and establish "friend requests" with other athletes or do you "follow" other participants on social networks?		0.552	
Item 7. The social networks helped you to interact with other participants?		0.678	
Item 8. Did you post in social networks about your attendance in the race?		0.635	
Item 9. Did you use social networks to promote your paricipation and/or to motivate others to attend?		0.811	
Factor 3. - Additional information.			
Item 10. Did you use social networks to get information about the destination of Benidorm?			0.918
Item 11. Did you look for information in social networks about restaurants, accommodation or other activities available in the location of the event?			0.692
CR	.858	.824	.868
AVE	.603	.544	.767
Number of items	4	4	2
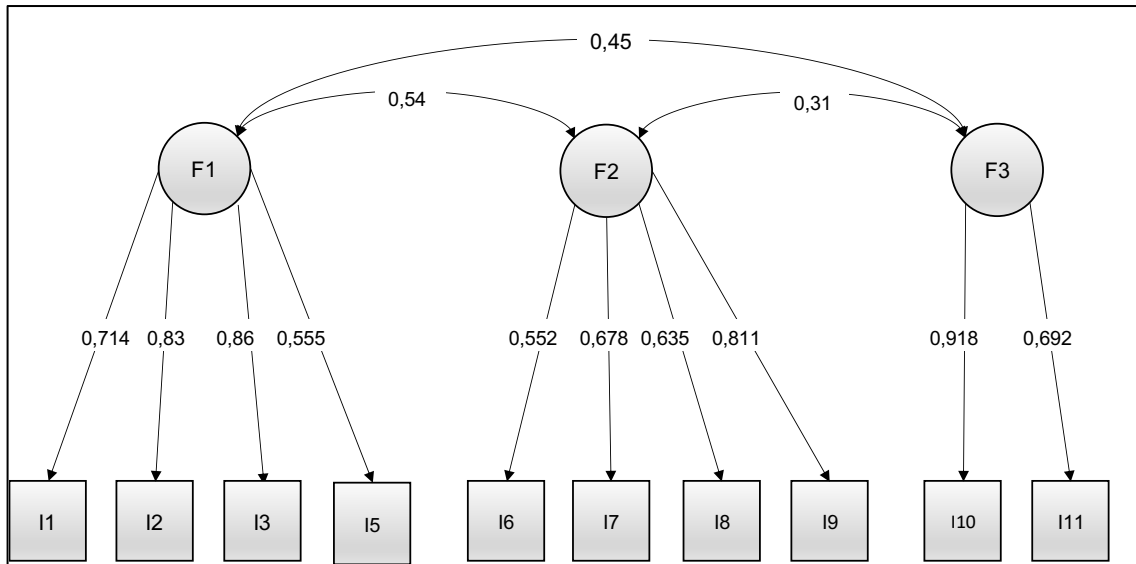
Figure 1. Factor model according to CFA

As shown in table 3 and figure 1, all items showed a factor loading above the minimum recommended value (>0.5) with a minimum factor loading of 0.552 for item 6 and a maximum factor loading of 0.918 for item 10.

Discriminant validity was determined following Fornell and Larcker (45), who suggest that the AVE of each factor should be greater than the squared

correlation between this factor and all other factors. As shown in table 4, the analysis of the correlations and R2 are significant at a level of p<0.001. All the AVE values were greater than R2, and thus the discriminant validity was adequate.

Table 4. Correlation's matrix

	F1 (R2)	F2 (R2)	F3 (R2)
F1: Perceived value on SNS	(.603)	-	-
F2: Interaction and eWOM	.413 *** (.171)	(.544)	-
F3: Information	.346 ***(.12)	.353 *** (.125)	(.767)

Figure 2 was obtained by using the structural equation model (SEM), which shows the path diagram of the structural and causal relationships between the variables, taking "additional information" as the independent variable and "perceived value on SNS" and "interaction and eWOM" as dependent variables. Table 5 shows the results obtained from these relationships between the different factors.

A significant influence of "additional information" on "interaction and eWOM" could not be confirmed (H1: β = 0.066; t = 1.065; p = 0.285). Although the total effect of "additional information" on "interaction and eWOM" mediated by "perceived value on SNS" was positive with a ratio between 0.364 and 1.521, it was not statistically significant (p = 0.382). Therefore, hypothesis 1 is rejected.

On the other hand, "additional information", which is an exogenous latent variable, has a significant influence on "perceived value on SNS" (H2: β = 0.192; t = 4.488; p < 0.001). Thus, hypothesis 2 is confirmed. Meanwhile, the variable "perceived value on SNS" had a significant influence on "interaction and eWOM" (H3: β = 0.847; t = 5.102; p < 0.001), thus allowing the confirmation of hypothesis 3.
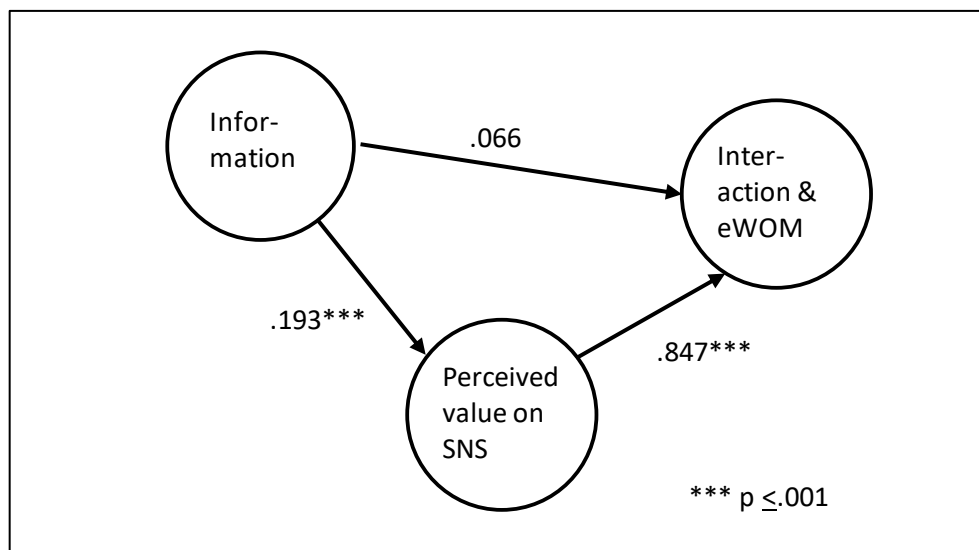

Figure 2. Factor relationships of the proposed model

Table 5. Results of the factor relationships

	Standardised estimates	Standard error	t	p
H1: Additional information → Interaction and eWOM	.066	.062	1.065	.285
H2: Additional information → Perceived value on SNS	.193	.043	4.488	< .001
H3: Perceived value on SNS → Interaction and eWOM	.847	.166	5.102	< .001

To reveal whether there was a difference in the perceptions between men and women, the non-parametric test for independent groups, the Mann Whitney U test, was used since the Kolmogornov-Smirnov test for normality showed that the variables were not normally distributed.

The obtained results show that there was a significant difference between the two groups in "perceived value on SNS" (U = 2.095, p = 0.036), with women having a higher perception than men. Similarly, "interaction and eWOM" are more important for women (U = 2.354, p = 0.019). However, there was no statistically significant difference between the genders in the seeking of additional information (U = 1.076, p = 0.282).

DISCUSSION

It is very important for event organisers and managers to understand the influence of social media on the perception of athletes participating in sports events and the impact of the perceived value on SNS and the eWOM intentions among them. Based on this information, they can establish and improve their social media strategies and take full advantage of the related benefits.

The main objective of this research study was to analyse the factors derived from SNS that affect athletes at a medium-sized sports event. In doing so, it attempts to follow previous research that emphasises the importance of digital communication in the sports tourism sector and in sports management (26,27).

According to the general evaluation of the athletes participating in the event, they scored highly on everything related to the event itself, the image, the expectation created on SNS, and the intention to attend again. On the other hand, there is a low average score for the use of SNS as a channel for interaction with

other participants and for establishing friendships. The search for information about the destination scored moderately.

Three factors could be extracted and confirmed by means of the AFE and the AFC, all of which showed factor loadings above the minimum recommended value. By means of the SEM, the directions and influences of the variables were revealed, and hypotheses 2 and 3 of the proposed model were accepted, while hypothesis 1 was rejected.

Additional information search on SNS does not have a statistically significant influence on interaction and eWOM. Therefore, hypothesis 1 is rejected. This means that, although athletes search for additional information on SNS, it does not imply that they subsequently interact with other athletes or talk about the event by word of mouth on SNS.

However, the additional information search on SNS does have a direct and causal influence on the overall perceived value of the athletes on SNS. Thus, hypothesis 2 is confirmed. Once information about the destination and/or additional activities in the destination has been sought, a perception of the destination and, consequently, of the event is created. Hence, it has an influence on the perceived value on SNS.

The variable "perceived value in SNS" precedes and positively and significantly influences the interaction activities with other athletes and eWOM, thus confirming hypothesis 3. This result is similar to a study focused on the social network Facebook, where it was shown that the perceived value of the user has a positive effect on the continuation of participation behaviour in the social network (46).

Perceptions between genders differ in terms of the perceived value on SNS and interaction and eWOM. In both, women have a higher perception. On the other hand, there is no significant difference between men and women when it comes to seeking additional information. The influence of gender on the eWOM factor and

the perceived value was also confirmed by Jalilvand et al. (36) and Calabuig et al. (47) respectively.

Therefore, taking care of the appearance on SNS, both by destination marketing organisations and the destination's complementary offer, as well as the event itself, can be important aspects when it comes to recommendations and word of mouth about the event. Communication strategies in these media are key for both event managers and tourist destinations, and their collaboration is fundamental. It is confirmed that coordination between social media and destination communication is essential (11).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

One limitation of this study may be the selection of the non-probability sampling discussed earlier in the methodology, but this limitation is minor as we tried to avoid this bias from the very beginning. Another limitation may be the small number of items assessed, which may be the subject of further research in the future. Other future research could focus on changes in the perception of the event before and after the event, as social media is used during all stages of holiday planning (15). On the other hand, it may focus on the comparison with another event similar in size and presentation on SNS and at the same destination.

Despite the limitations noted above, this research contributes to research on SNS derived factors that impact participants at a small or medium scale sports event.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, this study proposes a model whose instrument has values for all the fit indices above the minimum recommended value. Finally, three factors were obtained, named "perceived value on SNS", "additional information", and "interaction and eWOM". The perceived value on SNS (46), the value or quality of information available on social media and its influence on behaviour (48) and the importance of eWOM (16) have been widely discussed in the literature.

With the model obtained in this research, it was possible to show the impact of SNS and the influence between the various factors. It can be a useful tool to measure the impact on small and medium scale sports events. The proposed model has shown that the additional information factor has a positive and significant influence on the perceived value on SNS. However, it does not have a statistically significant influence on interaction and eWOM. In contrast, the perceived value on SNS by itself has a strong effect on interaction and eWOM.

Due to the obtained results, we suggest that the managers of small and medium scale sports events strengthen their social media strategies. A proper social media strategy is important given the influence of SNS on the perceived value and the overall impact of eWOM, which can be an important competitive advantage.

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